

In today's tight economy, an assessment of what you *really* need is more important than ever

**BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR**

**R**emember that old jalopy you drove in college? God bless that bucket of bolts for getting you around. When that beater finally broke down, however, you had two choices of what to do with it — buy new wheels or take the heap to a mechanic to see if he could inject it with new life.

You weren't sure what to do, however, because you didn't know jack about what's under the hood. You weren't sure if you needed a new ride or if your old one just needed a tune-up. Big money was riding on your decision, though. What to do?

If you're a superintendent with an antiquated irrigation system, you can probably relate. You know the course's irrigation system needs repairs, but you're not sure what it needs and where it needs it. You ask yourself: Should I spend the house and upgrade to an entirely new irrigation system, or should I spend frugally and upgrade only the components that need to be modernized?

Decisions don't get much tougher for superintendents. There's a lot of money riding on the choice, as well as possibly a superintendent's reputation.



MIKE KLEMM

The decision should come down to a proper assessment of an irrigation system's needs. Sounds easy, like a short par 3, but it can be brain-draining.

"There's more to it than meets the eye," says David Davis, an irrigation consultant in Crestline, Calif. "It's not as simple as just looking for worn-out parts."

Assessing a problem is as much about being patient, attentive, organized and responsive as it is about being technically savvy. If a superintendent is all of those things while making an assessment, his decision about what to do with his irrigation system will be that much easier.

# Irrigation Evaluation





### **Urgent, but ...**

There's a problem with the irrigation system, and it needs to be fixed — pronto. James Pitman, certified superintendent of Rolling Hills CC in Lomita, Calif., says superintendents must possess a sense of urgency when it comes to diagnosing problems with irrigation systems and fixing them.

Putting off fixing the problems will only lead to more trouble, Davis warns. "We call that deferred maintenance," he says, noting that some superintendents will defer major repairs for three to five years.

A fine and frightening example of deferred maintenance is a superintendent who doesn't pay attention to the deteriorating electrical grounding on the course's field controllers. "He puts off repairing it because he has to get on his hands and knees and get dirty to do it," Davis says.

Meanwhile, the ground wiring becomes loose and frayed. As a result, the controllers are damaged.

The bottom line: It doesn't take long for deferred maintenance to come back to haunt you, Davis says. "If you don't have a sense of urgency to solve a problem now, you might create a bigger problem later," he adds.

While a sense of urgency is important, you have to be careful not to be *too* urgent. A superintendent who's overeager to fix an irriga-

tion problem may be in danger of rushing or even bypassing an assessment. Then he ends up tinkering — or "fixing" a problem before he knows what it is.

Tinkering will only get a superintendent into trouble, Davis says. When the exasperated superintendent discovers after three hours that what he thought was the problem isn't really the problem, there's enough steam coming out of his ears to drive a tub down the Mississippi. "The problem with tinkering is you can make a problem worse," Davis stresses.

Superintendent Bob Miller has been there and done that, and he warns superintendents not to tinker — lest they enjoy mental anguish. Before Endicott, N.Y.-based En-Joie GC upgraded its irrigation system about five years ago, Miller found himself toying and trying to fix outmoded irrigation heads. It was not fun. "Tinkering turns into frustration," Miller says, recalling a time when he was ready to pull his hair out.

### **Gettin' the low-down**

Experience is important when assessing an irrigation system for repairs. Irrigation technology isn't rocket science, but it's also not as simple as A-B-C. It takes someone with knowledge and skill to make an assessment.

That person could be a veteran superin-

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**The question is: Should you spend the house on a new irrigation system or spend frugally on only the components you really need?**



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tendent like Pitman, who has more than 30 years of experience, or an outside consultant who specializes in irrigation technology. Pitman stresses that even the most practiced superintendent should keep an open mind about seeking help from an outside consultant. The bottom line is the bottom line and a consultant can help you save thousands of dollars, Pitman says.

Obviously, an experienced person knows what to look for and, more importantly, knows not to overreact to a problem. Remember that jalopy? Just because it had an oil leak didn't mean it needed a new engine. The same holds true with the problems associated with an irrigation system.

For instance, donuts and dry areas around sprinkler heads don't necessarily mean the heads need to be replaced. A person experienced in the process knows that it might only be the nozzles that need to be replaced, Davis says.

There are other telltale signs for other irrigation system woes, including a soaring electric bill. If your system is pumping the same amount of water as last year — but the increase in kilowatt usage from month to month has risen sharply — it's a clue there's something wrong. It could be that pipes are leaking or the pump station's motor is wearing out.

### Document that problem

Yeah, the repair bills for the irrigation system are piling up, but don't you dare throw them away. Davis advises superintendents to document irrigation problems and keep track of time and money spent on them.

You know that members of the green committee like to think they know a lot about irrigation. They don't, of course, and won't believe there are problems with a course's irrigation system if they can't see them. That's why you have to show them that file folder.

"I knew a golf course that had old steel pipe in the ground for its main lines," Davis says. "The pipe began to rust and leak. The superintendent of the course documented all of the leaks."

The superintendent had a map of the course on his wall featuring the irrigation system. Each leak in the pipe was marked with a dot. The superintendent also took several photos of the leaking pipes and saved a section of pipe that

had to be removed from the system because it sprung so many leaks.

When it came time for a meeting with his green committee, the superintendent was armed with documentation to support his request to upgrade the system. He showed the committee the map, the pipe and the photos. He stated his case and convinced the committee of the course's dire need. He got what he wanted.

Miller has been there and done that, too. He documented the many problems he had with the course's irrigation system at En-Joie. He wrote a report "in layman's terms" and distributed it to committee members. They talked about the report and how much it would cost to upgrade the system with new wiring, new heads and a computer system with radio controls. Committee members bought Miller's pitch, realizing that components of the course's irrigation system were outdated. "They realized we had to catch up with the competition," Miller says.

However, superintendents should walk a fine line when convincing green committees that their courses need irrigation upgrades. Most committee members are well-educated and take their roles seriously. If the superintendent wants them to spend big bucks on a renovation, they want to know why. But they want to be educated — à la Miller's pitch — and not told what to do.

Proper communication with your green committee or owner is vital during an assessment, and it can pay off in the long run. Pitman, who recently upgraded to a radio control system at Rolling Hills, says he saved the course about \$90,000 last year in water and electricity bills. Pitman says it's all about giving a superintendent the right tools so he can apply his knowledge and do his job successfully. "But you have to be able to show people that you're using to the max what they've given to you," he adds.

Brian Vinchesi, president of the American Society of Irrigation Consultants, points out that golf courses committed to remodeling projects this year will take a long, hard look at every line item because of the current economic slowdown. Irrigation upgrades will get the longest and hardest glances because of their high costs.

Proper assessment of a course's exact irrigation needs has never been more important. ■



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